

The Women's Studies emphasis also showed in the atmosphere of the class. The issues obviously mattered very much to seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds who were encountering ideas in books which they either had not yet encountered in life or had not yet known how to name. While a few students in the SEED class noted basic similarities between the eighteenth century and now for those born female, others highlighted the remarkable improvements in conditions and possibilities for women. All the students were enriched by hearing a voice from an earlier age which they could recognize and to which they could feel akin. Everyone loved Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet as much as they loved Alice Mun-

ro's Del. They were, after all, meeting characters often the same age as themselves, on thresholds and at crossroads.

A course of this kind is, in my view, fully possible for Grade 13 students. They get training in the traditional skills of reading, writing, and critical discussion. They get their eyes opened about attitudes. (One student wrote in her evaluation that the course uncovered the rigidity of her own ideas about a 'good' marriage, a 'good' wife, and a 'good' mother.) They get a historical understanding of what it might have felt like to live in an earlier period. And they get their wits sharpened on what it is like to be female — in books and in life.

## Women's Studies: A High School Program

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Photo by Sharon Ladd

### Les Etudes de la femme: programme au niveau secondaire

Cet article définit les buts et la méthodologie d'un cours sur les études de la femme donné au niveau du secondaire V dans un collège parallèle de Montréal. (MIND; moving in a new direction). L'auteur donne un compte-rendu détaillé de ses références et les modes d'évaluation utilisés dans son cours.

In the past few years many universities and colleges have begun to offer women's studies programs in recognition of women's changing roles and needs in today's society. However, in spite of the tremendous need to raise teenagers' consciousness, the same progress has not been accomplished at the high school level. At MIND (Moving in New Directions), the only alternative high school under the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, such a course has been offered successfully for the past three years.

Before discussing the course content, it is necessary to examine the basic premises and goals behind the course, for it is my firm belief that in order to succeed specific conditions must exist. First one must be convinced of the need to prepare teenagers for a changing world, in which not every woman will necessarily marry, have children, be dependent on a husband, and be happy forever. It follows, therefore, that one of the major aims of a women's studies course at the high-school level must be the exploration of myths and stereo-

typed roles that have been imposed not only on women, but also on men. This entails a self-exploration process whereby all students, male and female, are required to analyse and understand the origins of the roles they play, their own misconceptions, prejudices, and biases.

The course that I teach is not a 'women's lib' course, as some often like to nickname it. It is not an 'interest' course, but a matriculation course in senior English, which gives students the same number of credits as any other course. The course has equal academic status to others on the curriculum. This is the basis for success in attracting students to it — those who are genuinely interested as well as the skeptics. Once the relevance of such a course has been established, half the battle is won.

Exploring teenagers' attitudes is a complex task that must be systematically approached. Using a sound-slide set from the Centre for Humanities entitled 'Man and Woman: Myths and Stereotypes', the topic of male and female roles is introduced as the first unit of the course. Students are expected to discuss thoroughly in small groups the audio-visual material presented. I prefer to use group rather than individual discussion because I have found that most teenagers are reluctant to express themselves freely as individuals. Creating an unthreatening atmosphere conducive to free discussion is essential since the format of the course is based primarily on the results of student discussions. Once this has been accomplished, one can begin to explore 'real' feelings — i.e.

not how a person should feel according to a set standard. I have found teenagers, especially girls, are under a tremendous pressure to become 'liberated'. No one, however, has taken the time to explain what it means, the problems it entails, or the decisions that must be taken. Achieving this goal is one of the purposes of using the kit as a starting point.

While completing activities related to the kit, such as surveys, questionnaires, and essays, the students are required to read *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. I chose this book specifically because it deals with the inability of one woman to cope with the daily pressures of preconceived roles. An attentive study of the novel helps students to become aware of the kinds of problems women have to face, as well as the different choices and decisions open to women.

In order to explore their own biases and prejudices, the students are asked to give oral presentations using materials from the 'Women's Kit' (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education). They are required to summarize their readings and evaluate the material. The class, as a whole, participates by questioning the student involved and evaluating his/her performance. This kind of work is carried on throughout the course, usually one or two presentations per class, so that new concepts and ideas are continuously explored.

To expose students to women's contributions in literature, we read work written by: Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf, Anais Nin, and Gertrude Stein. Selected short stories from *Women and Fiction* (Susan Cahill, ed.) are also read and discussed. One of the most popular stories has proven to be 'To Room Nineteen' by Doris Lessing. Students enjoyed analysing the story and suggesting different courses of action that would have helped the heroine. I should mention that by the time the students are reading this material, their awareness of women as people has been greatly raised. They are now capable of looking at a problem or situation without making brash judgements.

In addition to these literary texts, students are given a series of lectures on Women and the Law. This information has been greatly appreciated by both boys and girls, as very few of them are aware of their rights. Guest lecturers are invited to speak on subjects currently discussed by the class. This year these included a woman who had investigated sexism in education, a representative from Planned Parenthood, and one from the Woman's Information and Referral Centre. I was also able to arrange visits to major centres open to women in Montreal — e.g. Auberge Transition (Home for Battered Women), Birthright, Women's Centre, and Rape Crisis Centre. The purpose of these visits was to make students aware of the day-to-day problems women face, problems with which the students might not ordinarily have contact.

As the course progressed, the format changed and students were required to research individual topics presented to them in 'packages'. The topics included: Women in Politics, Women in Education, Women in History, Women and Marriage, Parenthood and Women in other Cultures. All these areas had been thoroughly discussed in class and students were now asked to pursue one topic in depth. A written project as well as a formal oral presentation to the class was the major assignment.

Towards the end of the course I felt students were ready to discuss a new degree of subjects and we had a discussion on Rape. Using Susan Brownmiller's *Against our Will — Men, Women and Rape*, the class examined the causes, reasons, and results of rape. Panel discussions took place in which staff members as well as students debated. By the time this happened, the discussion had involved not only the students in the course, but also a great part of the school. At this

point I felt that the Women's Studies course had acquired credibility and drawn a great deal of interest outside the classroom walls, and this had been one of my personal goals.

In evaluating the success of the course, one basic criterion is the measurement of attitude change. Using another sound-slide kit from the Centre for Humanities entitled 'The Re-Education of Women and Men — Creating New Relationships', students are asked to record their answers and compare them to similar questions given at the beginning of the course. It is significant that the students themselves realized the change in attitude.

Next year not all students at MIND will opt for Women's Studies. It is sufficient at this point to state that since the course was introduced three years ago, the enrolment has jumped from eleven students in the first year to forty this year. With a total student population of 125, this represents quite a high percentage. I feel confident that next year I will be able to reach even more students.

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